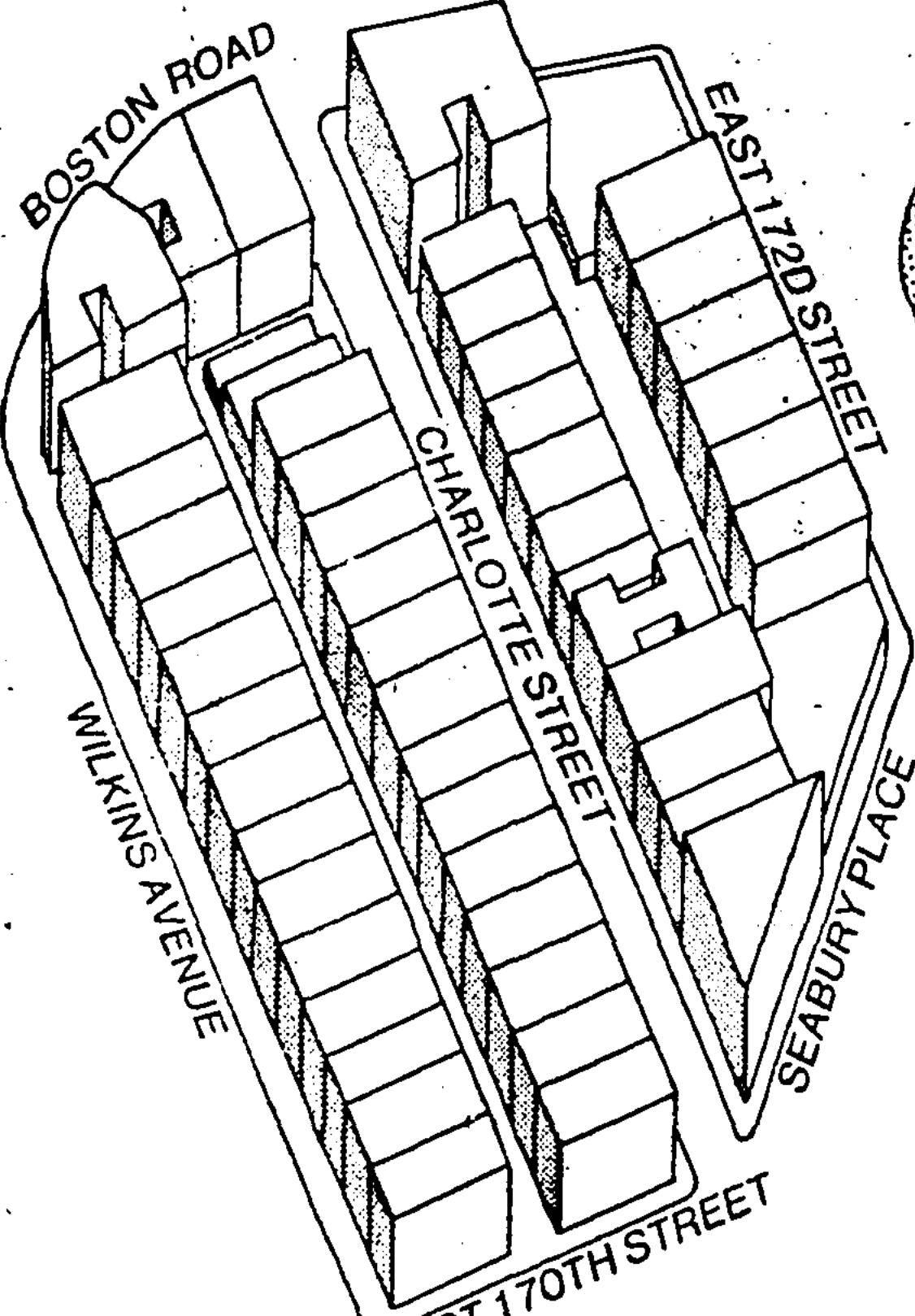


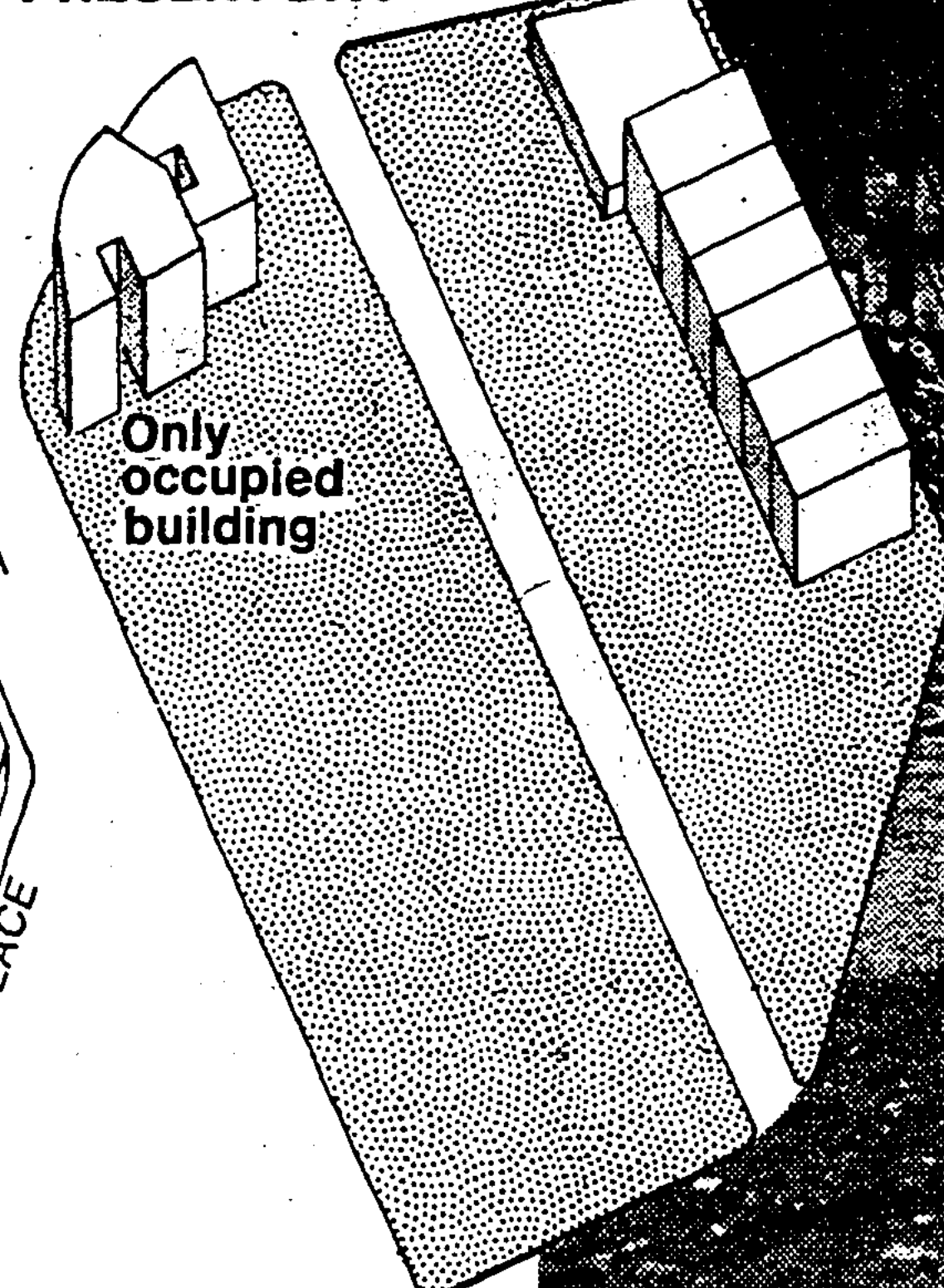
CHARLOTTE STREET

After 70 Years, South Bronx Street Is at a Dead End

UNTIL 12 YEARS AGO



PRESENT DAY



The New York Times/Edward Hausner; maps by David W. Dunlap

Maps depict buildings that once lined Charlotte Street and those that remain. Above: A typical scene.

By FRED FERRETTI

Joseph McNevin, who is now 85 years old, knows Charlotte Street, the South Bronx block where President Carter took a walk, as it was in the 1920's, a street of fine brick apartment houses, some with elevators, with embossed tin and carved-granite cornices, wrought-iron stair rails, polished-brass mailboxes and marble lobbies.

He remembers it as a block he envied as he walked along its cobbled pavement from his family's cold-water flat to Crotona Park, a block away across Boston Road, to play baseball with his friend George Meany on the team they called "the Wiltons." Over the last 17 years, he has seen the block crumble and die.

The 51 apartment buildings on Charlotte Street and its companion blocks, Wilkins Avenue and East 172d Street, contained more than 1,000 apartments, housing more than 3,000 people. Today, only nine buildings stand. Six of them have their windows and entrances blocked off with cinder blocks and concrete and two of them are fire-blackened hulks.

One hundred people now live in the last building, 1500 Boston Road, in 37 apartments where the street meets Wilkins Avenue.

George Lasca, 82, remembers Charlotte Street and Wilkins Avenue when all the people were there, when he took a job as superintendent of 1500 Boston Road in the 1930's. "After dinner," he said, "the people would come down with their chairs and sit around on the sidewalk while the children played. It was like a picnic, a neighborhood picnic. It was so nice here."

Dr. Jacob Freedman, 58, thinks about Charlotte Street in the 1940's, particularly the corner where it meets Jennings, less than a block south of where

President Carter stopped to look at eight-foot high piles of trash and weedy undergrowth. He remembers the Roumanian, a neighborhood restaurant run by "a Mr. Feltner who smoked cigars" that offered, for \$1.35, kosher broiled steak, chopped calves' liver, white radishes, pickles and free seltzer. It was a place where you went for lunch on Saturday before promenading in Avenue.

To Saul Panken, 54, Charlotte Street was the gateway to Penfold Street, now called Crotona Park East, where in 1950 he married his wife, Abby, in Temple Kehilath Israel. "That was the Central Park West of the Bronx," Mr. Panken said. "The synagogue was beautiful, with Moorish columns and a big canopy." Today its facade is painted dull gray and it is the Tre-

mont-Crotona Day Care Center.

Lucille Williams, who is in her late 40's, remembers Charlotte Street at Boston Road—where the Carter limousine parked to let the President get out—as it was in the 1960's, a vital shopping center. She remembers the Progress Cleaners on that corner, and,

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Dr. Jacob Freedman, who runs Prospect Hospital, in the hospital parking lot with his collection of facades from demolished buildings.

South Bronx Street Is Facing a Dead End

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across the street, Solly Sherman's vegetable and deli market. "He sold wholesale to restaurants," she said, "but you could get the best food if you didn't feel like cooking on Friday."

The deli was then in what is now one of the eight abandoned, fire-gutted buildings still standing in the Charlotte Street neighborhood.

Robert Esnard, 39, knew Charlotte Street in the early years of this decade, when people still lived there, when he used to pick up a college friend and go to the Crotona Park tennis courts, "when the middle-class people began to be replaced by the poor and the unemployed and half the buildings were gone."

"You couldn't conceive that a neighborhood could self-destruct so fast," he said.

A Matter of Viewpoint

Mr. Esnard, until recently chairman of the Bronx office of the City Planning Commission and now deputy borough president of the Bronx, recounts the death of Charlotte Street in historical terms. Mrs. Williams, who has refused to leave—she lives on Seabury Place, overlooking Charlotte a block away—speaks more specifically.

"By the late 60's half the buildings were gone," Mr. Esnard said. "Abandonment had begun. The middle class had begun to leave, replaced by minorities and the poor. Those on welfare and those unemployed moved into Charlotte Street."

"Buildings were left to rot. Landlords left. Bankers wouldn't loan a dime. There was no such thing as insurance, fire or otherwise. The population turned over. Add to this the fact that Charlotte Street was selected as a site for two new schools, a public school and a junior high, and site-clearing went on and you have the final irony: two school sites cleared for a population that didn't exist anymore."

"What happened?" Mrs. Williams asked. "People ran away, that's what happened. People kill a neighborhood. Attitudes kill a neighborhood. Fear, lack of understanding kill a neighborhood. It's not even a specific fear, it doesn't have to be anything basic, it's just unreasoning and blind."

Originally Part of a Farm

"You hear a story from the other side of town. The story frightens you. You run. That's what happened to Charlotte Street. That's why there's nothing here."

Charlotte Street's life cycle began on

the farm. The land was originally part of the James Beck farm, a swath of land cut through by the old Boston Post Road, once the coach route from Boston to New York and Washington. The first buildings to be erected at what is now the intersection of Charlotte and Boston Road were along that route.

They were generally five-story and six-story walk-ups, with shops at ground level. People moved there in the city's successive ethnic immigration wave—the Irish, the Germans, the Jews from eastern Europe.

According to Borough President Robert Abrams, who was born in the Bronx, Charlotte Street and Wilkins were "a notch up." They were not for the desperately poor, he said, "but for the working person who had made it, or who could afford better, for the new professional."

Charlotte Street was close to the New York Central Railroad lines, close to the new White Plains Road elevated subway lines, which the city built just before World War I.

Houses Were Mostly Brick

The houses were mostly brick, almost always with ornate cornices and window ornamentation, the mark of homes meant for the upwardly mobile. They each had lobbies made of Italian marble from Carrara, according to the memories of such people as Mr. McNevin and Dr. Freedman, who runs Prospect Hospital, a small private institution on nearby Kelly Street.

"They all had views," said Dr. Freedman. "All the bathrooms had windows, with living rooms, dining rooms and a kitchen. Very big rooms."

Mr. McNevin remembers that the apartment houses, though more desirable than Manhattan tenements, did have facades graced with fire escapes. Wet wash was strung from the buildings on clotheslines. He remembers going to the Crotona Theater, which no longer stands, to see vaudeville. Later, when he had his own Bronx roofing business, one of his best customers was Ben Levine, who had a hardware store on Wilkins.

"Wilkins was a nice street, like Charlotte, except that it had stores," Mr. McNevin said. "It was real nice. By the 20's I guess most of the people living there were Jewish, and the whole area was built up. The homes were beautiful. I remember when we used to come to play ball we called ourselves 'the refugees from St. Mary's' because our home field was St. Mary's Park."

By the time the 1930's arrived, the two-square block area with Charlotte at its center was fully built up.

Practically all of the apartments were built by immigrant Italians, who were skilled masons. And it was they who carved the cornices that were attached to the roofs of the buildings along

Charlotte and Wilkins, the columns in front of the entrances to the apartment houses, the granite window treatments and the Corinthian columns.

Dr. Freedman remembers some buildings, such as the six-story apartment at Wilkins and East 170th Street, which stood out from the row of 13 apartments that ran from it up Wilkins to Boston Road. "It was like a Venetian court," he said. "The brickwork was interspersed with granite blocks and the cornice overhung the building like a crown."

He is so taken with these stone carvings that he has made it a private cause to collect pieces of stone friezes, gargoyles, granite carvings—even stained-glass windows that were once in Temple Kehilath Israel—as the buildings were demolished. He now displays them in the corridors of his hospital.

Charlotte Street was a relatively "new" street in the 1920's, 30's and 40's that attracted many Jews from New York's Lower East Side.

"The Grand Concourse didn't come into existence until the 20's," Dr. Freedman said. "Fordham Road was nothing. It was wilderness when Boston Road was thriving. Gun Hill Road, Pelham Parkway were later. So a great many Jewish people came here first."

By the 1940s, Charlotte Street and Wilkins Avenue had become an almost solidly Jewish neighborhood. Dr. Freedman remembers the McKinley Square theater, a Yiddish playhouse about five blocks from Charlotte, where the Russian actor Boris Tomashefsky performed. He also recalls the Miller Brothers appetizer stores, the clothing stores, fruit markets, cleaners, shoe store and tailor shops that blossomed along Wilkins. Wilkins, he recalls, was the Sabbath promenade, the Rosh ha-Shanah gathering place, for the neighborhood.

Mosaic Floors and Tile

"We all paid about \$40 a month and had a superintendent and a porter, and dumbwaiters to take the garbage downstairs," he said. "We all had mosaic floors, tile."

Garment workers moved into Charlotte Street and so did teachers, many of whom were on the staff of Public School 61, across Boston Road from Charlotte Street. The building still stands, rings of grass protected by high iron fencing, painted red. At 1516 Charlotte, halfway down the block, almost the precise spot that the Carter group milled about, stood the grandest apartment on the street, and in it lived doctors, lawyers and nurses—the professionals.

And there they stayed until the early 60's. Then they began to leave.

The demolition began about 10 years ago," Mr. Esnard said, "but it really was heavy in the last five or six years. First the people left, then the homes disappeared." And, 70 years after it was born, Charlotte Street ceased to exist, except as a place on a Bronx map.